

EAAE – ENSHA Thematic Network on Conservation

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Report: Second Workshop: “Conservation / Transformation”

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The Custom House in Dublin (Ireland), a Neoclassical 18th century building designed by James Gandon, was an ideal starting point for the II^o Workshop “Conservation / Transformation”. On Thursday 17th of September 2009 the workshop opened with an introduction by the Chief Architect of the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Mr. Martin Colreavy, followed by a warm welcome by the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Mr. John Gormley. Each of the members of the Scientific Committee offered the participants a series of short presentations, expectations and provocations as an encouraging introduction to the Workshop topic.

Firstly, Professor Stefano F. Musso, from the Faculty of Architecture of the University of Genoa and acting as the Coordinator of the Conservation Network, set the themes outlines in the previous Workshop held in Genoa in 2007, and presented the four key themes for the current one: communication, design, sustainability and universal access. The four subjects opened to debate were inter-connected in a very close relationship; it was very difficult to differentiate the boundaries between them, being almost impossible to discuss about one without contemplating the effects caused to another.

The format of the workshop was conceived in an experimental format: the participants were selected by the submission of abstracts as usual, but they were not requested to develop their papers until after the real experience in situ of the workshop, and having shared knowledge and thoughts with other participants. The aim was about encouraging group discussion, through the consideration of real sites, and promoting cooperative learning and teaching as a result. By the creation of a discursive atmosphere, the end was to obtain cohesion and greater coherence among the resulting reflective papers of the participants.

This presentation was followed by Professor Chris Younès, from the University of Paris “La Vilette”. She reflected on the expectations of society regarding the preservation of heritage, outlining uncertainties of the significance of the past and about how to inherit, and asking what are we in charge of in relation to the cultural, ethical or even climatic heritage, in order to consider the nature of our

common goods. Next, Professor Francesco Doglioni, from the University of Venice IUAV, gave the participants some examples of interventions in historical buildings and environments with the purpose of putting forward some considerations on the theme of the workshop. His speech started with a provocation:

“Restoration aims at projecting a way of changing so that the building may remain as much as possible the same it was before, that is, it may not change at all. A change in order not to change is a logical contradiction.”

Doglioni posed the audience questions to think about such as “how, how much and why, introduce a change in order to avoid the loss of the building’s character?” or “how far is one to go with a cleaning action or with an integration/replacement operation?”. The examples of restorations given tried to distinguish between those interventions that were made with the sole purpose of ensuring the building’s permanence (repairs, structural strengthening, etc.), and those demanded in providing for universal access, safety and sustainability as actual and legitimate demands; changes that generate tension with conservation ethics, but are necessary in order to conserve/transform, to use and to live in again.

Finally, Professor Loughlin Kealy, from the School of Architecture, Landscape and Civil Engineering of the University College of Dublin and acting as Workshop Chair, explained the details of the organization of the Workshop and the logistics for the following two days of the Workshop: participants were divided into three groups and each group was assigned to a different location to facilitate creative exploration of the theme “conservation/transformation”. The three sites selected were considerably diverse in nature but all were equally in need of consideration regarding the preservation of their patrimonial value. The sites were:

- Country house and demesne: Borris House; as a significant example of a privately owned architectural, historical and landscape heritage, containing ancillary buildings and extensive ranges of agricultural buildings and woodlands.
- Urban environment: Kilkenny city; to exemplify the case of a modern town built on a

medieval city with conflicts of conservation and development.

- Ruin: Kells Augustinian Priory; a medieval monastic settlement, long abandoned and in ruins since the 17th century, within a setting of productive agricultural landscape.

The groups were of different sizes, reflecting the logistics of the location assigned, but always trying to obtain mixed-ability and multicultural teams. The themes to be addressed “communication, design, sustainability and universal access” were to be explored in the context of the site in question, and each group was to prepare a statement on its significance and how the themes refer to the conservation/restoration issues involved.

At the end of the first working day of theory and practice in context, each of the workgroups presented their main declarations to the other ones on a first meeting on the evening of Friday 18th at Borris House, in order to review the study cases and start the discussion. Thereafter, participants enjoyed a reception at Borris House hosted by Carlow County Council and Carlow Tourism, followed by a Workshop Dinner at Step House Hotel. These were perfect opportunities to allow participants to meet and share with other participants assigned to different sites than theirs.

On Saturday 19th the Workshop closed with its Plenary sessions devoted to reflections and conclusions. These took place in the Parade Tower of Kilkenny Castle, with the participation of the Kilkenny County Manager, the Lord Mayor of Kilkenny city and the Chief Executive of the Heritage Council. Firstly, each site-group worked separately in order to make a preliminary listing of the issues detected and to articulate the main key points identified. Thereafter, each group rapporteur made the site group presentation in plenary session, to communicate and discuss it with the audience. Finally, the Scientific Committee concluded giving some perspectives and general conclusions of the event for the purpose of establishing the next steps – preparation of papers and their publication.

This new workshop methodology provided the opportunity of facilitating cooperation between university professors from different European

countries with the common intent of analysing and proposing solutions to the current conflicts that exist in the protection of heritage: how to preserve the inheritance, or how to transform it, acknowledging that what is conserved is no longer what it was before intervention - a dilemma that we still have to face and to keep working to resolve. ■